

Freedom Is Not Free

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Among the most meaningful moments of any visit to Israel is a pilgrimage to Mount Herzl, Israel's national cemetery, particularly to the rows of graves from the War of Independence. I always take time to read the names—and with each, the details provided: Born in Poland. Died in the Battle of Latrun. Age 19. Born in Czechoslovakia. Died in the Battle for Jerusalem. Age 17. Born in Romania. Died in Operation Danny. Age 21. The message is clear: Israel's independence was purchased in blood.

As we sat down to our Seder tables at home this week, we reduced our cups of joy by ten drops for the plagues on Egypt. We acknowledged that, in that case, our people's freedom was purchased with the blood of other peoples. The Haggadah depicts the angels rejoicing when Egyptians drown in the Red Sea, but God rebukes them. Those Egyptians are God's children, too.¹

And so it was with Israel's War of Independence. The Jewish people's freedom was purchased not only with Israeli soldiers' blood, but also with the blood of Palestinians and other Arabs. That time, God was not the one who killed soldiers of Arab armies that attacked after Israel declared independence. God also did not kill Palestinian and Bedouin villagers caught in the crossfire—and, in some documented instances, massacred.

Palestinians, including Arab citizens of Israel, understandably do not celebrate *Yom HaAtzma'ut*, Israel's Independence Day. Instead, they observe that occasion as *naqba*, the catastrophe. No, Palestinians did not have their own homeland prior to Israel's establishment. Moreover, Jordan and Egypt did not empower Palestinians to establish their own state, as envisioned by the United Nations 1947 partition plan, on land remaining in Arab hands after the 1948 war. However, while many Arab peoples were gaining independence from colonial powers at the period of Israel's establishment and in the decades that followed, one price of Jewish freedom was and remains that Palestinians cannot have their own state on the whole of their ancestral land. Israel's freedom, like that of our ancient forbears liberated from Egyptian bondage, came at a cost, not only to those fighting for independence, but to another people.

Soon after liberation, ancient Israelites learned that they would have to work to maintain their freedom, and Israelis have increasingly come to know the same.

Before the Exodus, God tells Moses, “When you have freed the people from Egypt, you will worship God.”ⁱⁱ God does not provide detail at that juncture. Soon, though, the people learn. Fifty days after liberation, the Israelites receive Torah at Sinai, replete with laws and commandments that they must observe. No longer servants to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, the Children of Israel are now obligated to serve God.

And how do the people respond? They build a Golden Calf! In this week’s Torah reading, God forgives the people, but not before Moses instructs the Levites to put some three thousand of the idolatrous Israelites to the sword—and if that weren’t enough, God sends a plague.ⁱⁱⁱ The Children of Israel are free to serve their God, not to do just as they please.

Israelis have never thought that they had finished fighting for their freedom. Most Israelis are obligated to serve in the Israel Defense Force for two or three years after high school, then in the reserves for decades thereafter. Israelis have never been free of military threat, as we saw tragically this week, with rockets launched by both Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and a terrorist rampage today on the Tel Aviv promenade, which I frequent each summer.

Recently, Israelis have become acutely aware that they had neglected a different but equally critical aspect of their liberty. They had not nurtured the democracy on which the Jewish State was founded. Yes, Israeli voter turnout is outstanding, outstripping our record in the United States tremendously. However, too many Israelis were untroubled by a serious flaw in their democracy: Jewish settlers in the West Bank, including those whose settlements are considered illegal even by the Israeli government, retain the right to vote. By contrast, their Palestinian neighbors in the West Bank are not Israeli citizens and cannot vote in elections that determine how their lives will be ruled.

That harsh reality brings the accusation of apartheid from abroad, but Israelis were generally willing to live with the cognitive dissonance required to believe that they lived in a democracy while hundreds of thousands of Palestinians lacked voting rights. Now, though, ordinary Israelis living inside Israel proper find their own rights threatened by an extremist right-wing government that seeks to disempower the courts that protect citizens from government excesses. Some have begun to realize that, when democracy is corroded in one place, and the people do not protest, it can be destroyed in others.

Israelis have taken to the streets by the hundreds of thousands—cumulatively, millions—and plan to do so again tomorrow, the fourteenth consecutive Saturday night of mass demonstrations. Increasingly, those

demonstrations include opposition to West Bank Occupation, or at least to the most severe forms of oppression there. Protestors seeking to preserve Israeli democracy must struggle for democracy not only for residents of Israel proper, but for everybody living under Israeli rule.

Americans are particularly vulnerable to the criticism that we take our freedom for granted. Yes, a prior generation sacrificed collectively—all of them, across the spectrum—to protect freedom not only for Americans, but also for Europeans and Asians, from the evils of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. More recently, though, our nation failed to defeat a persistent existential threat from a violent, extremist perversion of Islam. Why? Perhaps because the American people were never asked to cut back on our fossil fuel consumption, simultaneously funding the other side of the War on Terror and wreaking untold damage on our planet, all the while turfing military service largely to low-income Americans.

Other threats to American freedom come from within. Yesterday, Representatives Justin Jones and Justin Pearson were expelled from the Tennessee legislature because they dared to raise their voices in protest against gun violence, loudly. And they did so while committing the apparent crime of being young Black men. The vote to expel the white legislator who joined Representatives Jones and Pearson in protest failed. When asked why she had not been expelled, Representative Gloria Johnson said, “It might have to do with the color of my skin.” Yesterday’s move was only the latest in a string of actions by the Tennessee legislature to diminish the voting power of city dwellers and Tennesseans of color, mostly by moving as many as possible into districts dominated by white rural voters,^{iv} just as the Arkansas General Assembly did by dividing Pulaski County’s Black communities into three separate congressional districts.

Freedom always comes at a price. Just as we acknowledged the tragedy of Egyptians drowned in the sea at the Seder, so must we work to redress harms done in our name, in Israel and here at home. And freedom requires constant vigilance. Israelis are setting an example of the sacrifices in time and energy required to save a democracy from destruction. Americans, take note.

We may do so with faith. The Children of Israel take the Source of their freedom for granted, even worshiping a Golden Calf rather than the God Who liberated them. When they repent, returning to nurturing their freedom, God turns to them, lovingly revealing that even a God who demands loyalty can be forgiving. Let us act to preserve our freedom—in America, in Israel, and around the world. Then, may God respond, once again, with love.

Amen.

ⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 39b.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 3:12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 32:27-28, 35.

^{iv} Emily Cochrane and Eliza Fawcett, "Tennessee G.O.P. Punishes 2 Democrats by Throwing Them Out of House," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2023, [Tennessee House Expels 2 Democrats Over Gun Control Protest - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/us/politics/tennessee-house-expels-2-democrats-over-gun-control-protest.html).